

Poetry, Erudition And Arms Policy

By Marquis Childs

WHAT TWO extraordinary speeches can achieve has surprised the man who made them and almost everyone else in this Capital where speech-making is a way of life. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara talked to the newspaper editors in Montreal and then to his daughter's graduating class at Chatham College and comment in the following two weeks has:

- (1) Pushed him forward, as a Republican presidential candidate.
- (2) Proposed him as a future Secretary of State.
- (3) Intimated he might become, as Assistant President.
- (4) Nominated him for philosopher-at-large.

Reminded of this the Secretary looks puzzled. All the fuss seems out of proportion, since he made earlier speeches as broadly intellectual in their outlook. Having quoted in his Chatham speech a range of philosophers and poets from Plato and St. John Chrysostom through Simone de Beauvoir and Robert Frost, the Secretary was surprised that no one, not even the professor of English who congratulated him, caught him up on a misquotation.

He goes to the bookshelf opposite his big desk in his Pentagon office and gets a volume of the collected poems of T. S. Eliot. There it is. The final quotation was not from Eliot's "Fourth Quartet" but from the "Third Quartet."

ONE OF the extraordinary things about this man is the way he can change gears without seeming effort. He carries in his head, as though to prove his contention that the human brain is "an utterly incredible computer" that man could never duplicate electronically, the facts and figures of the incredible complex that is the Department of Defense with its \$52 billion budget.

For nearly five and a half years McNamara has waged an unceasing struggle. His goals are to maintain civilian control over his vast domain and to try to insure that Congress does not compel him to spend more money and allocate more men and machines than he believes essential for a given objective. The lid constantly threatens to blow off with a resulting arms race making the present contest look like a fun fair.

The House Armed Services Committee added \$1 billion to the budget that McNamara submitted for the next fiscal year. While he is not compelled to spend any of this money, if it is finally appropriated, he knows how incessant the pressures are to move on a project beloved by one or more members of the powerful committees that pass on military spending. The pressure for a new manned bomber, which McNamara has steadily resisted, is matched today by the pressure to go for development of an antimissile missile system.

It is here that the arms race, as the figures come out of McNamara's memory, promises to go through the roof. An antimissile missile system of the sophistication projected by Pentagon research and development would cost \$30 billion. The rumor is that the Soviet Union is now positioning antimissile missiles around Moscow and Leningrad. There is no hard evidence for this.

McNAMARA'S estimate is that the less sophisticated Soviet antimissile system would cost \$13 billion. But he will guarantee that in the decade between 1975 and 1985 America's offensive missiles will get through any defense the Soviet Union can put up.

Already \$2 billion has been spent on research and development on the Nike-X antimissile system and a half-billion dollars to that end is in the budget for next year. McNamara's profound concern is that money actually appropriated for the antimissile system will be a go-ahead—the camel's nose under the tent—and there will be no stopping short of the enormous cost of what is in the present stage at best a doubtful protection.

This is only one of innumerable fronts on which he holds the line. The House Armed Services Committee, under the flamboyant chairmanship of L. Mendel Rivers of South Carolina, has ordered the Secretary to proceed "notwithstanding the provisions of any other law" to build two nuclear-powered missile frigates at a cost of more than \$250,000,000. The blunt language of the committee's report raises the fundamental issue of the power of Congress to order the executive to act against the executive's best judgment.

A speech is not a policy, although the Johnson Administration sometimes seems to think so. The McNamara performance of intellect and erudition is a remarkable phenomenon in politically minded Washington. But while he is locked in so many day-to-day struggles and conflicts, of which the conduct of the war in Vietnam is only one, whether the Secretary could evolve new and creative policies is an unanswered question.

© 1968, United Feature Syndicate